

The Principle of Resurrection

by T. Austin-Sparks

The principle of resurrection is the idea that God is interested in bringing about new life and restoration, even in the midst of death and destruction.

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:19, Ezra 7:22, Ezekiel 37:12, Matthew 5:13, Mark 9:50, Romans 12:1, Galatians 4:25-26, Hebrews 12:22, Revelation 3:1, Revelation 21:10

Topics: "Resurrection", "Vitality in Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the principle of resurrection as a vital aspect of God's work, illustrated through the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall under Nehemiah. He draws parallels between the physical restoration of Jerusalem and the spiritual revival of God's people, highlighting that true life and vitality come from God alone. The sermon underscores that the presence of God in our lives is marked by resurrection and newness of life, which is essential for a meaningful testimony in a world filled with death. Sparks warns against losing the 'salt' of life, which represents the vital element of God's presence, and encourages believers to seek a deeper relationship with God to recover this life-giving essence.

Transcript

"... and salt without prescribing how much" (Ezra 7:22).

"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men" (Matthew 5:13).

"Salt is good: but if the salt have lost its saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves" (Mark 9:50).

We come back to the book of Nehemiah, and in connection with the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem under the inspired leadership of Nehemiah, we want to look at one more inclusive factor which this work represents. We are speaking about the recovery of the Lord's testimony - what Nehemiah spoke of as the "great work" which God hath put into his heart to do - and when we come to consider this recovery on the positive side, there is one great principle of recovery which includes all the other work. It is the principle of resurrection. It does not require very much profound thought to recognize that the rebuilding of the destroyed wall of Jerusalem comes into line with a testimony of resurrection, and to see how 'all of a piece' this is with Israel's history, because we are seeing - I trust we can say that - that this wall is an emblem of the spiritual history of the people. What is true of the wall at this time is true of the people. The wall only

expresses the condition of the people - spiritually broken down, with many gaps, nothing complete or perfect, nothing to full satisfaction, and therefore nothing to the glory of God.

We pointed out, earlier, that Nehemiah was contemporary with Malachi, and Malachi's prophecies give us a very clear, though very terrible, account of the spiritual condition of the people of God at that time. So this wall, representing the state of the people, reveals very clearly the need for a resurrection. Israel's history repeatedly called for that, but in this very connection you will remember that, in looking on beyond the captivity, the greater prophets had spoken of their return as resurrection. For instance, Ezekiel, with the captivity fully in view, had cried to the people, as commanded by the Lord: "Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves" (Ezek. 37:12); and in that great picture-parable of this - the valley of dry bones - we have undoubtedly the matter of resurrection in relation to Israel after the captivity, after the exile. So that their coming back a remnant from Babylon to Jerusalem, and building or rebuilding the wall, answers to the prophecies concerning resurrection, although in the temporal and earthly aspect the fulfilment is very imperfect. A much greater fulfilment is still in view.

But here is the point - it is a matter of resurrection. The going into captivity was first of all judgment, judgment for sin, and it is therefore represented as followed by death: for death follows in the wake of judgment, and Israel is represented as having gone into death, into a grave; their exile being in the nature of a spiritual grave. If we ask what death is, it is being put away from God, it is separation from God. And so it was with them. They were out of the place where God had appointed to meet them; they were away from the Lord. And if to be put away from the Lord in judgment is anything, it certainly is death.

The Resurrections of the Earthly Jerusalem

Now whenever God has moved again to recover His testimony in any part or in greater fullness, such movement has always been marked by that which is inherent in resurrection, namely, newness of life - or, to put it in another form, victory over death. It has always been like that, and it always is like that. A movement of God in relation to His testimony in greater fullness always has the character of a resurrection, the nature of a new life.

The historical records of Jerusalem show that the city has been again and again the scene of sieges, overrunnings and destructions. The very survival of Jerusalem just as an earthly city is nothing short of a miracle. There are other great cities which, so far as this world is concerned, have been far greater and more glorious than Jerusalem. Babylon, for instance, Ur of the Chaldees, and we might even say Rome, with others. They were great and mighty cities, from the standpoint of men greater and mightier than Jerusalem. But, so far as their former glory is concerned, they have gone down once and for all. Babylon - where is Babylon? Ur - where is Ur? A year or two ago I flew over Ur of the Chaldees - and what could be seen? Nothing but excavations of centuries gone by. And Rome - what is Rome now compared with the great and glorious imperial city of past centuries? a shadow filled with monuments and ruins, things which speak of the past glory. These cities have gone down, to rise again no more as they were.

But Jerusalem - she has come up, again and again she has come up after siege and destruction, showing quite clearly that God - the God of resurrection - is interested in Jerusalem. He is maintaining, even in the world, in a temporal Jerusalem - a poor thing from man's standpoint; I do not think any one would really choose to live in Jerusalem apart from sentiment - He is maintaining, in a Jerusalem that has been raised as from the dead again and again, a parable of the greater truth.

The Full Triumph of the Heavenly Jerusalem Over Death

And when we move from the earthly to the heavenly: when we move from the old dispensation - the dispensation of that Jerusalem, as Paul puts it "that now is", here on the earth - away to that other Jerusalem of which the Apostle speaks, in heaven, the "Jerusalem which is above" (Gal. 4:25,26), or to that Jerusalem to which we are now come, according to Hebrews 12:22, or to the Jerusalem which appears at last in fullness of glory (Rev. 21:10): what do we come to? We come to the full triumph over death, because it is in that final heavenly Jerusalem that the tree of life is found, and the river of water of life. Everything speaks of death fully and finally conquered. So that the wall in recovery is but a parable and a picture of this great truth, substantiated in history, but fully realized in glory in the spiritual realm. This is a monument to the principle that when God is associated, really associated, with anything or with anyone, or when they are associated with God, the mark will be resurrection - newness of life. It will be life. A testimony in life is the testimony that is here represented as being recovered, throwing its light right on to our own time, which is marked by so many features that characterized the days of Nehemiah spiritually. God will move again - shall we not say God is moving again? - to bring about in a new way, within a people, this great testimony to the indestructibility of His own life; something which declares that His life, though it may seem oft-times to go into death, to be swallowed up, to be overwhelmed, nevertheless comes up again; this life cannot be fully and finally destroyed. A testimony in life. It is a testimony to something that God does, that is the point.

Resurrection: The Unique Province of God

We have so often said that resurrection is the unique province of God. We may do a great deal at resuscitations artificial respirations, but we can do nothing in resurrections. Once death has taken place, that is the end of all man's power and hope, and then it is for God to act, or it is nothing. God is the God of resurrection - that is His alone prerogative: so that anything that really is a work of God bears this mark, that nothing can account for it but an indestructible, imperishable life. There is something there which is more than of man.

Sometimes man comes into the things of God - we shall see that in this book as we proceed - usurping the place of God in His Jerusalem, in relation to His testimony; and then death begins and destruction concludes the process; God hands the thing over to death. It is a solemn thing to realize that there comes a point where God has to stand back and hand over to death, because man has taken hold and got in His way. But when man does this the fires of judgment work. The result of such interference with God will work itself out; and then, when that work of fiery purification is accomplished, God returns and raises from the dead. That is the history of many things with which God has commenced, but from which in the course of events He has had to stand back, and then again He has come in. It is like that.

And it is like that sometimes in individual Christian lives. God finds that He can go on no further; He has gone as far as He can. Now He is obstructed; there is a will there that refuses to yield to Him. There is something there that will not let go to God. He stands back, and if it be through long, long decades - witness Israel's forty years in the wilderness, and seventy years of captivity; long years of barrenness, emptying and desolation - the Lord does not give up. He would recover, He would restore, He would come again, He would have a testimony even there. But oh, what a solemn warning not to lose life, to lose years to lose the fruitfulness which might be, by resisting the Lord, and knowing nothing but a barren death so far as our usefulness to Him is concerned. Something that God has done is the testimony that God would revive, not what man has done for God, but what God Himself has done, and more - a testimony not only in life, but a testimony of life; not only what God has done but what God will do through what He has done. He has raised an instrument, He has brought it back to life, He has a vessel resurrected - now see what

He will do through it!

A testimony of life - that surely is the glorious triumph of the ultimate Jerusalem "coming down from God out of heaven". What a chequered history that name Jerusalem has had! But now at last there is triumph in connection with that very name. No longer does it represent or symbolize defeat and failure and tragedy. It is now the symbol of God's triumph. Here at last death is swallowed up in victory. And what happens? Out from that Jerusalem there flows a river of water of life. The nations are deriving the value. The tree is bearing its fruit, watered by that river, and the leaves of the tree are for the health of the nations. It is a testimony of life.

Everything Permeated by Life

Now, there is a good deal of difference between what is commonly called life and what God means by life, and that is why I read those fragments about salt. This life of which we are speaking has in it an element. I only pass from one language to another when I change from using the word 'life' to using the word 'vitality'. It is the same word in two different languages, but it is useful here. This life has a vital element in it. There is something here that really has got a sting in it. We sometimes speak of things having a 'kick' in them. There is something there, a positive element which, if we touch it, makes us realize we are touching something mysterious, something vital. If that touches a situation, it registers; the situation knows that it has been touched by something. It is this element that is represented by salt.

Now, salt is a very interesting thing in the Bible. You notice we quoted from Ezra. Ezra, of course, precedes Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah are working together to the same end. They are all part of the whole. Ezra had to do mainly with the beautifying of the temple after it had been rebuilt, and with certain reforms, and with the recovery of the Word of God. But when God acted sovereignly - according to the first words of the book of Ezra, "that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom" and gave liberty and every provision and facility to those who voluntarily chose to go back to Jerusalem, not by law or constraint, but of a willing heart - in all this marvelous provision that the king made, there was this added, this strange thing. 'Give them this and that in abundance, silver and gold and all the other things': and then this - "and salt without prescribing how much". Limitless salt!

What was that for? Well, you see, salt is a synonym for life; even outside of the Jewish or Hebrew economy, salt was recognized almost universally as the symbol of life. In some realms they made a covenant in blood, by shedding one another's blood and then mingling it. That was a covenant in blood between two people or two communities. In other realms they took salt and mingled it, making a covenant in salt; but the two things meant the same thing. Blood and salt meant life. Without salt no sacrifice was ever regarded by God as acceptable. That meant, in the thought of those times, that God would never accept a dead sacrifice. Every sacrifice offered to God must be a living one. Yes, the animal was slain, and to all intents and purposes it was dead, but salt contradicted death, denied that it was dead, gave it that something, that vital element, that made it a living sacrifice. The Lord Jesus said, "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13), and Paul said, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1). "Salted with salt" was a phrase of the Lord Jesus (Mark 9:49).

"Salt without prescribing how much". This was in the recovery testimony of Nehemiah. That is, life more abundant; abundant life. That is the testimony that the Lord is seeking, this vital element. "Ye are the salt of the earth". In other words, you are the very life in this dead world. With all the death that is here - and

everything as far as God is concerned is in death: only Christians know it, but they do know it: if we are really the Lord's, we know how dead this world is, it is death all around - the Lord says 'In the midst of all that, you are the life, you are very life, of this death-encompassed world; you are the life of the world, you are the salt of the earth'. "Be salted with salt". "Have salt in yourselves". 'Be alive'; to change the language again, 'be vital'.

Such is the testimony to be recovered - something, a mysterious something, that is not in the mineral: for there can be the mineral that has the show, the appearance, of the real stuff, but it has lost its vital quality. "If the salt have lost its savour..." You can have all the pretence, all the profession, all the outward appearance, but something has gone, and that missing something says the testimony that should be within is not there. To recover that something is what the Lord is after: not an outward framework, not so much material with a semblance - it was the charge laid at the door of a church in the book of the Revelation, that they 'had a name to live but were dead' (Rev. 3:1) - not that, but this something, this mysterious something, about the Lord's people which comes from God Himself and which speaks of the presence of God within them.

An Old Testament Illustration

We have illustrations of this in the Old Testament. We have Elisha and the men of Jericho who one day went to him and said, "The situation of this city is pleasant" - 'every prospect pleases' - "but the water is bad, and the land casteth its fruit" (II Kings 2:19) - the mark of death. Of course you know where that came from. You remember that when Jericho was destroyed, the curse was pronounced upon it, and Joshua said, "Cursed be the man before the Lord that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: with the loss of his firstborn shall he lay the foundation thereof, and with the loss of his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it" (Josh. 6:26). Death, the mark of the curse, was pronounced upon it, and now these years afterwards the men of the city come and say that in the very waters of this city, with all the prospects that are fine and good, death resides; nothing comes to perfection, "all is vanity and vexation of spirit", all is disappointment. Elisha said, "Bring me a new cruse and put salt therein". They brought him the new cruse and put the salt in, and he emptied cruse and salt into the waters and the waters were healed. Death was destroyed by the salt, but it had to be in a new vessel. This is resurrection - newness of life in a new creation.

We could stay long with that, but you see the point. If Elisha is the prophet of life, as undoubtedly he is, for everything about him and all his works speaks of life conquering death, here is the testimony. The salt is the emblem of life which destroys the power of death and of barrenness, unfruitfulness and disappointment. A wonderful life is this. 'Ye are the life of the earth.'

We have other illustrations, but I am not going to stay to give them. We said in a previous study that the book of Ezra represents the sovereignty of God, while the book of Nehemiah represents the co-operation of man with that sovereignty. Going back to Ezra: if that book is the embodiment of the sovereign activity of God, God acting from heaven on His own, right out from Himself, what is He doing? If He stirred the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and if Cyrus made this decree, and if the decree was the result of a work of the Spirit of God in Cyrus, then, when Cyrus said, "And salt without prescribing how much", it was a provocation of the sovereignty of God that made him say it. Cyrus was undoubtedly an instrument of Divine sovereignty. You know how Isaiah speaks about him. "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus... I will gird thee, though thou hast not known me" (Isa. 45:1,5). An instrument in the sovereignty of God. And now this man, in the hand of God's sovereignty, is saying: "and salt without prescribing how

much". All these other things may mean very little if there is no salt, no vitality. This element must so to speak pervade the whole.

God is after this something which is more than the framework of things. It is an indefinable something. Sometimes you may hear hymns - some of the good beautiful hymns - rendered on gramophone records. These hymns may be sung by two different kinds of people. Some of them may be sung by a very capable, a very artistic choir, sung with perfect technique, with beautiful artistry, and with fine voices and harmony. Others, on the other hand, may not be sung with all that professional skill, with all that artistry, or with all that standard and quality of voice - but you can tell the difference between the saved and the unsaved every time. You know that on this one side it is a church choir of unconverted people. I mean this - perhaps that is harsh judgment - there is something lacking. It is wonderful, it is beautiful, but there is something not there that you miss. On the other hand, you know these people are saved people, they are singing because they love the Lord, they have a relationship with the Lord.

Now of course it takes a Christian to discern the difference; but there is a difference. You know it, you have heard it yourself. It is just salt - this indefinable something that makes all the difference between those who are in vital relationship with the Lord and those who are doing the same thing without that relationship. They have got all the semblance, all the appearance, all the bulk, of the salt - yes, but there is something not there. The salt is without savour. We do not want just a technique, accurate, correct doctrine, proper Christian practice, forms, liturgies and all the rest. What is necessary, whether these are present or not, is that there should be this vital something that causes people to realize: 'Well, they may not be artists, they may not be tremendously capable people, there may not be all the marks of wonderful efficiency about them; but you meet the Lord, you register some indefinable thing that answers to your heart, and that is the thing that matters'. The recovery of that testimony counts for more than all the words, the phraseology, the form, the technique. It is quite possible to have a New Testament technique and New Testament churches, Christian doctrine and practice, but still be without that something that registers, and that is the testimony to be recovered.

So we see that the issue is one of life. Now, in order to get that, God often has to take very stringent measures. He will never be satisfied with anything less than that. However much else there may be, He will not be satisfied with less than that, and so He will be prepared to put the thing through the fire, even to seem to part with it for a time, if peradventure He might recover that which has been lost. He is the God of resurrection. Maybe the Lord is dealing with some of us on this line. There was more salt at one time than there is now. There was more sting in our testimony than there is now. The Lord may be leading us through a hard way. Or perhaps there never was that sting that the Lord wanted, and the Lord is trying to teach us that He is the God of resurrection - that we are helpless, useless, worthless, until God Himself acts and we cry out for that something which only He can give. Whatever it may be, this is what the Lord is after, and He will deal with us all the time, in this way and in the other way, with that in view. His dealings will be in order that at the end there shall be a testimony to His absolute triumph over the power of death - that which only the Lord can do; and if you feel today that you are there, that only the Lord can do it, believe me you are in a very hopeful position. Mr. Spurgeon once said that if ever you feel that it requires a miracle to accomplish a certain thing, you are in the right position to ask God for it!

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